



## Literature and Psychology: An Analysis through Mohan Rakesh's Halfway House

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### Abstract

Mohan Rakesh's craft as a playwright can be easily observed in drawing characters who are struggling with their respective psychological constructs. His play *Halfway House* is path-breaking in the genre of Hindi Theatre for its novel experiments in terms of theatrical devices and stage settings. The play is also instrumental in displaying Rakesh's expertise in exploring the disruptions and distractions resulting in fragile human relationships. These relationships are perpetually flickering amidst the strong winds of circumstantial and psychological complexities of the play's characters. This paper contributes to understand Rakesh's literature with a psychological approach using *Halfway House* and its characters as case study. This paper demonstrates the role of the title, episodes and character as integral constituents to the plot, and also highlights the conflicting perspectives and motives of the characters irrespective of the length of their role.

### Keywords

Hindi Theatre, Relationships, Circumstantial, Psychological, Conflicting, Perspectives, Motives.

Though multiple perspectives are available on the body of work produced by Mohan Rakesh, almost everyone seems to accept his mastery in creating a web of circumstantial complexities, where the characters are stuck in their emotional dilemma while struggling with their inner turmoil. In his plays, Rakesh manages to weave intricate psychology of intense characters which are carefully created and developed by him. The characters of Nand-Sundari in *Lehron ke Rajhans*, Mallika-Kalidasa in *Aashaadh ka Ek Din* and Savitri-Mahendranath in *Halfway House* help us explore the wavering emotional bonds of love or conjugal relationships. Since human emotions are unpredictable, it consequently transforms the fate of human relationships as they too are struggling constantly under the threat of unpredictability.

In *Halfway House* not just Mahendranath and Savitri but other characters also seem to be caught in an abyss of their own socio-psychological making. Each notable figure in the play is consequential to the frame of the plot and narrative but at the same time, they represent a social caricature of the utilitarian world outside. Although it is done

through an artistic expression of tightly knit subplots, dialogues, theatrical techniques and character sketch. Almost all the characters in *Halfway House* remain morally ambiguous and leave the play open-ended to the audience's speculation and perception. There are no white, black or grey shades that Rakesh uses for his characters. Instead, he leaves the characters of *Halfway House* with an outline and allows his readers or viewers to paint them with the hues of their own choice and understanding. The 'man in black suit' establishes this sense of obscurity in the very beginning of the play. That very man in the black suit from the prologue further flummoxes the audiences by portraying the other four men as well. One plausible explanation offered for using this theatrical device has been that Rakesh wanted to highlight a similitude of psychological nucleus among various men by making one man play the role of five different men.

The title of the play in its Hindi original *Aadhe-adhure* is called 'Halfway House' in its English translation by Bindu Batra. Although many people are of the opinion that this isn't a suitable translation of the original title because one, it isn't close to the literal translation of the original Hindi source and two, because 'house'

has a mercantile connotation to it with the use of a physical space made through bricks and walls which includes the family members as mere components. It doesn't mean the same as 'home' which is a more intimate and personal term to describe a family that shares more than a physical space instead of merely co-existing. However, I would like to explore the title in three ways.

First of all, looking at the term *Halfway House* semantically, it stands for an equal distance from both extremes which can effectively refer to that space of rest as well as unrest where you have nothing to lose and nothing to gain. You are in a state of flux as well as in a state of stillness. This represents a state of mind where you might be stuck in your comfort zone because any movement towards either side will disturb this equilibrium of motion and emotion. Secondly, if we look at its other denotations, then one of the modern usage of the term 'Halfway House' also refers to a centre for rehabilitating former prisoners, psychiatric patients, drug addicts after they leave prison or hospital and before they start to live on their own. Their purpose in the Halfway House is to learn or re-learn the mandatory life skills required to reintegrate into society while being capable of managing better support and care for themselves. They are probably termed "halfway houses" due to their status of being halfway between a life of complete independence and autonomy while they are subjected to in-patient or correctional facilities. Thus, these residents are highly restricted in their behaviour and freedoms. This duality of the purpose behind the institution of this 'Halfway house' is pretty comparable to the dilemmatic chaos being created in the house of Savitri and Mahendranath for all its members. This Halfway house is responsible for availing its residents the shelter that provides them with all basic amenities along with social, medical, psychiatric, educational and other similar facilities. The 'Halfway house' of Mahendranath and Savitri is also expected to provide each other and their children with an ambience of such provisions, care and concern. However, due to the restrictive nature of the

Halfway houses, they might end up somewhere defeating their own purpose. On one hand, it claims to teach its residents the art of independent living while it forces its members to resort to a limited life of an extremely controlled environment. Therefore, the families like that of Savitri and Mahendranath or any such middle-class family in similar situations is trying to find its anchor to create a home of mutual understanding, love, care and concern but until then they are struggling to survive in their respective halfway houses. Therefore, the title 'Halfway House' might not be the exact literal translation of the original Hindi title but it essentially conveys the same essence effectively.

The plot of *Halfway House* is about a family of five members even though the play revolves more around the central character Savitri and her relationship with various men in her life. Therefore, this play becomes quite relevant to the exploration of man-woman relationships and the psychological factors which determine the volatile equation between them especially in middle-class families of the postmodernist period. Mahendranath is Savitri's husband who has failed to secure financial stability for himself and his family. He is the brunt of constant jibes and taunts from Savitri since she is the sole earning member of the family. Savitri sees Mahendranath as an 'incomplete man'.

Rakesh also dares to break the fourth wall in the very beginning of the play itself through the 'The man in black suit' who acknowledges the presence of the audiences through gestures and dialogues. The prologue of *Halfway House* sees the man in the black suit raising a lot of questions especially regarding the identity of the men. The man in the black suit in the *Halfway House* mentions having "no separate identity". Thus, the creation of similitude and the constant negation of the conventions regarding theatrical devices and traditions are quite a deliberate attempt. Another interesting device used by Rakesh in this play is that of not using the names of the character and even goes to the extent of numbering the male characters as first man, the

second man and so on. This further dissolves the individual identity of each character and successfully imparts all the characters a ubiquitous personality which seems familiar and therefore relatable to one and all.

In the Rakeshian canon, characters portray the divided psyche of the modern man. They are fierce, intense, rude, rebellious, stubborn people while at the same time they are also vulnerable, submissive, weak and lonely. They are victims of their circumstances. Their mistreatment in the hands of an inhumane social structure and its expectations has led them to develop a certain personality type which is a mixed reaction to personal failures and social anguish. The utilitarian approach of the world leads them to develop something known as 'purpose anxiety'. Although psychologists have already researched, discussed and acknowledged a particular kind of distress that one experiences while looking for a purpose of their existence, the popularisation of the term "purpose anxiety" to explain this kind of anxiety is more recent.

As per the University of Pennsylvania researcher Larissa Rainey, "Purpose anxiety can provisionally be defined as the negative emotions experienced in direct relation to the search for purpose."<sup>1</sup> She explores this topic in-depth in her paper, 'The Search for Purpose in Life: An Exploration of Purpose, the Search Process, and Purpose Anxiety'. Therefore, it's the kind of anxiety that one experiences, while there is an absence of a sense of purpose and one is too aware that it's missing. As per Rainey, Purpose anxiety can be experienced at two different stages:

1. While striving to unveil life's true calling or finding one's purpose of living
2. A passion to live life's purpose and experience the fulfilment in it.

We notice both these stages in the subconscious concerns of the characters in *Halfway House*, even though less evident

through words and more evident in their actions or disposition.

Studies reveal that a strong sense of purpose and meaning in life is an indispensable propellant to human existence. It fuels the fire in human mind machinery that allows his boat to float. This gives rise to two pertinent and logical questions:

First, is human life impregnated with a sense of purpose that it must deliver in terms of solutions and actions to enable the experience of fulfilment? Second, is this quest for fulfilment through the discovery and attainment of the purpose reasonable? If we try to figure out these strains in *Halfway House*, Savitri's expectations from her son Ashok to get a job indicates an expectation of him to not turn out like Mahendranath who is seen as an incomplete man by Savitri as he is unable to fulfil his socially gendered role of being the earning male in the family. She expects Ashok to not disappoint her with the similar 'purposelessness' that is reflective of Mahendranath's personality. However, she does see him as a reflection of Mahendranath when she refers to Ashok as 'your son' while talking to Mahendranath. Interestingly, this similar style of drawing gender-based parallels is reciprocated by Mahendranath when he refers to Binni as 'your daughter' to Savitri. Since Binny 'ran away' with Manoj to fill the void and need for male support and companionship, Mahendranath's comparison highlights the similarity he suggests in Savitri's metaphorical running away from her inner void and seeking solace in other men; thus, reflecting the ghosts of the pasts hovering over the present of this family.

Purpose anxiety can be experienced by humans in different ranges. For some, it could be a mild concern and for some moderate while for others, it could be a high functioning disorder that could impact their life goals and general behaviour to a great extent.

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<sup>1</sup>Mead, Elaine. "What is purpose anxiety and do you have it?". [www.healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com/health/what-is-purpose-anxiety-do-you-have-it), June 2020. Web. <<https://www.healthline.com/health/what-is-purpose-anxiety-do-you-have-it>> [Accessed on 7 June 2020]

Differentiating between ‘normal’ from ‘pathological’ anxiety isn’t an easy task. A person may be characterized by Anxiety but it can’t be characterized as anxiety disorder necessarily unless any evident harmful consequence occurs. It encompasses a multitude of adverse emotions that includes

Ashok blames the dysfunctional elements in the family and indirectly his lack of purposelessness to Savitri’s ambitious nature and expectations from others. When he refers to himself as “useless”, it shows that he understands that this is how his mother, family and society perceive him and his father. Thus, his nihilistic attitude is more like an escape from his unexpressed purpose anxiety that he doesn’t want to confront directly.

In her heated exchange with Juneja, Savitri expresses her views on marriage that she sees it as an institution that is meant to fulfil one’s void with the presence of a life partner that not only fills that void but also ‘completes the partner’ and thus, Mahendranath seems like

However, these very expectations seem to form a major explanation for the failure of their marriage as one is trying to search for the meaning of their own life through the personality and presence of their partner and the consequent lack of the fulfilment of this expectation. As mentioned in an article by Daniel Goleman explaining Purpose anxiety, “This lack of a sense of meaning no doubt plays a major role in midlife crises. Halfway through their lives, forty somethings are looking back and wondering what all those decades really meant and if

stress, gloominess, anxiety, cynicism, frustration, rejection, fearful, obstructive and defeatist thoughts. “In her research on the concept, Rainey found a whopping 91 percent of participants surveyed reported experiencing purpose anxiety at some point in their life.”<sup>2</sup>

an incomplete man to her who has not been able to fulfil these expectations in a marriage.

THE WOMAN: Let me tell you about the **reality** I know. Why does one get married? In order to fulfil a need. . .an inner . . . void, if you like; to be self sufficient. . . complete. But that’s not why Mahendra got married! The object of his existence is . . . as if . . . he were there only to fill in the gaps in the lives of others . . . whatever other people expect of him . . . or in whichever way they think they can use him . . . (2.69)<sup>3</sup>

they were well lived, creating for some (perhaps many) a storm of prolonged stress, feelings of detachment, and intense questioning of the significance of one’s role and identity—in other words, that search for meaning.”<sup>4</sup> This midlife crisis is adequately expressed in the play *Halfway House* even before the coinage of the term Purpose anxiety. The scene where Mahendranath asks the entire family one by one about his age and expresses his anguish over the disrespect and parasitic status assigned to him as an unemployed husband of a working woman despite

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<sup>2</sup>Mead, Elaine. “What is purpose anxiety and do you have it?”. [www.healthline.com](http://www.healthline.com), June 2020. Web. <<https://www.healthline.com/health/what-is-purpose-anxiety-do-you-have-it>> [Accessed on 7 June 2020]

<sup>3</sup>Rakesh, Mohan. *Halfway House*. Trans. Bindu Batra. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2003. Print.

<sup>4</sup>Goleman, Daniel. “The Rise of Purpose Anxiety”. [www.kornferry.com](http://www.kornferry.com). 2020. Web. <<https://www.kornferry.com/insights/articles/the-rise-of-purpose-anxiety#:~:text=Such%20%E2%80%9Cpurpose%20anxiety%E2%80%9D%20has%20been,can%20make%20a%20meaningful%20difference.>> [Accessed on 1 June 2020]



being the eldest member of the household, his Purpose anxiety becomes evident coming directly from the horse's mouth.

THE FIRST MAN: I know I'm like dry rot in this house, eating away at its very foundations! But I'm no longer hungry. I'll never be hungry again! (1.27)<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the family of Savitri-Mahendranath is a dysfunctional family which runs on the modus operandi of compromise. Savitri in this situation seems to portray a myriad of emotions starting from a cold wife and mother to a detached woman seeking her own identity and desires. Tired of fulfilling her role as a mother and wife, eventually she decides to retire to a life of her well-being where she wants to live for herself and not for others. However, such a quest for a woman of her age and society isn't an easy life choice that one can make and she fails in her attempt to do so through various social and psychologically restricting factors imposed on her by those around her.

There is another very important scene that represents Mohan Rakesh's skill in creating a wonderfully obscure and complex net of interpersonal relationships which are carefully woven within the delicate fabric of the social structure and with the fine threads of deep-rooted psychological understanding of human behaviour.

THE FOURTH MAN: The point is that if any of these men had been a part of your life instead of Mahendra, you would have still felt that you had married the

wrong man. You would still have encountered a Mahendra, a Juneja, a Shivjeet or a Jagmohan and thought and reacted in the same way. Because the meaning of life to you is how many different things you can have and enjoy at the same time. One man alone could never have given them to you, so no matter whom you married, you would have always felt as empty and as restless you do today... (THE WOMAN laughs hysterically.) You're laughing...?

THE WOMAN: Yes...  
I don't know ... yes,  
perhaps I am. Go on.  
(2.74)<sup>6</sup>

The history of hysteria or hysterical laughter as associated with women owes its genesis in the response to women's changing roles in the personal and social domain. According to Laura Briggs,

"HYSTERIA, WE LEARNED FROM FEMINIST HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN the 1970s, was never just a disease. It was also the way nineteenth century U.S and European cultures made sense of women's changing roles."<sup>7</sup>

In the same essay, she mentions how these cultural changes introduced a trend of associating "nervous weakness" as a

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<sup>5</sup>Rakesh, Mohan. *Halfway House*. Trans. BinduBatra. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2003. Print.

<sup>6</sup>Rakesh, Mohan. *Halfway House*. Trans. BinduBatra. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2003. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, Laura. "The Race of Hysteria: "Overcivilization" and the "Savage" Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology". *American Quarterly*, June 2000: Vol. 52, Page 246-73. Print.

gender-specific illness found mostly among women. This clearly seemed like a bias to restrict and revoke women's mobility physically, emotionally, economically and socially. It provoked the feminists to question the authenticity of intent in such a diagnosis which seemed like an attempt to keep women at home. Association of hysterical laughter with mad women can be seen as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in international literature too. Thus, Savitri's hysterical laughter brings before us the history of psychological suppression and domination inflicted upon the women by society over the years. Witch-hunting, character assassination, mental instability, gaslighting, impregnation etc have been various ways in which people ensured women's sphere remained restricted within the closed confines of her home. This play shows the emotional turmoil of a family struggling in the period of late sixties during the twentieth century when socialist India was ridden with industrial strikes.

Throughout his collected works, from plays to short stories, Rakesh uses flawed and vulnerable characters to showcase his sensibilities towards the realistic portrayal of the relationship between human psychology and society through literature and its artistic expressions.

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